

The Church That Encourages

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14 Pursue peace with all *people*, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:

15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; 16 lest there *be* any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. 17 For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears. (Heb. 12:12-17)

During the journey of Christian and Hopeful in *Pilgrim's Progress*, they are weary and tired, and end up trespassing into someone else's land. They fall asleep on that land, and it turns out to be the land of the Giant Despair, who owns Doubting Castle. He takes both of them, and imprisons them in his dungeon. Day after day, he comes at them with a stick, beats them terribly, and then taunts them to take their own lives to end their misery. At one point, Christian begins discussing whether suicide is the best way out, and Hopeful talks him out of it. There they remain in Doubting Castle, until Christian remembers he has in his pocket the key of Promise that can open the doors of Doubting Castle.

In that illustration, Bunyan is showing that not only is discouragement painful and deeply unpleasant, it can also be dangerous. Discouragement can lead you to places you didn't think you'd go, can lead you to thoughts you didn't imagine you'd think, can lead you to actions you didn't think you'd do. Discouragement is not just a minor mood, it can be a mortal threat to your soul. It can threaten whether you are faithful to the finisher of the faith – to the finish.

When it comes to encouraging you to endure, we have seen the main way we do it in the first eleven verses of chapter 12. We keep our eyes fixed on the Author and Finisher, while we lay aside our weights and sins, and remember the witnesses around us. We also remember that our trials are actually blessings disguised as bruises: they are God's planned parenting of us. In God's family, pain is gain: God is using difficulty to prepare us for Heaven, and root out our pride, and purify our love and trust, and make us a picture of Christ to the world.

But all of those encouraging thoughts still need something else. They need the ministry of encouragement from other believers. God has designed us and designed life that it is not good that a human should be alone. As Ecclesiastes says 9 Two *are* better than one, Because they have a good reward for their labor. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him *who is* alone when he falls, For *he has* no one to help him up. (Eccl. 4:9-10)

The Bible has no theology of solitary Christianity. The idea of the Christian hermit didn't come from the Bible. Scripture never glorifies the lone wolf, the isolated mystic, the lone Christian with nothing but his Bible, screen and Internet connection. Far from it. If we are to endure in faith, one of the means that God uses to preserve us to the end is the Body of Christ.

God has ordained the ends as well as the means. He ordains the end: that a certain person will be healed, and He ordains the means: that a certain Christian will pray and a certain doctor will apply medicine. He ordains the end: that His Son will die for our sins, and He ordains the means: that Judas will betray Him and the Sanhedrin will have Him executed.

So God ordains that the faith of a true believer makes it to the very end. But He also ordains all the means that sustain and refresh and oxygenate that faith. And one of the most important means is the ministry of encouragement by the Body of Christ.

The book of Hebrews has told us several times that this is necessary for our faith.

12 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; 13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. (Heb. 3:12-13)

24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Heb. 10:24-25)

In fact, he describes the whole book as an exercise in encouragement.

And I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words. (Heb. 13:22)

Now the writer is going to say one more time: you must encourage one another if your faith is to endure. It is loving for others, and good for you. He that shines a light for another's feet, finds his own way lit up. So he gives a series of commands which we can group as three methods to encourage each other to endure.

I. Encourage By Strengthening and Straightening

12 Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.

The first thing we do is strengthen those who are weary and discouraged. When running, the hands and arms are good indicators of how tired someone is. When they begin to hardly come up, the body is exhausted. The next thing that shows up are knees that look wobbly and unstable, because the stabilising muscles around the knees are now so fatigued that they cannot hold the knees straight.

The command here, for all Christians, is: strengthen the hands and knees of fellow exhausted Christians. Restore them back to their right posture, lift them up. Who is this? I think it is all of us, at some point. The zeal is flagging, the hope in our eyes is fading, our resolve to keep going seems ebbing. We're dragging to get out of bed, to get to church, to open our Bibles, to pray.

So the writer quotes from Isaiah 35, where believers in Israel were discouraged by having had a series of bad kings, spreading false teaching in the land. So Isaiah's prophecy says to these discouraged people: 3 Strengthen the weak hands, And make firm the feeble knees.

Now he tells them how: Say to those *who are* fearful-hearted, "Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come *with* vengeance, *With* the recompense of God; He will come and save you." (Isa. 35:3-4)

Strengthening discouraged believers is done mostly through words of comfort and affirmation. This is the word of kindness, the praise, the affirmation.

What do godly words of comfort sound like?

They sound like commending any sign of God's work in their lives. Paul could commend the Corinthians for what signs there were of God's grace. Right praise of others is praise of God. They sound like encouraging a believer with the promises of what God is and will be to us. They sound like encouraging a believer with testimonies of personal struggles and victories.

But he doesn't only say strengthen, he also says "straighten". Make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather healed.

The straight path is God's clear and simple truth. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. God's truth, God's wisdom is always the clearest and most direct answer to our problems. It isn't always the easiest, but it is always the clearest, the safest, and the least confusing way.

When you're discouraged, your problems start to seem like winding paths, even multiple paths. Direction becomes unclear, and the fog and mist of unbelief begin to make things even murkier. In this state, the writer says that what is already lame may get twisted, dislocated. If a cross-country runner gets so tired that he veers off the path, he is danger of tripping, slipping, twisting an ankle. A discouraged believer is an unstable believer, and the last thing they need is the winding, curving, bumpy road of worldly counsel, and false doctrine.

If strengthening is a word of comfort, then straightening is a word of truth. Alongside the affirmation, we also bring correction. We help each other see the plain, unambiguous, revealed will of God.

25 Let your eyes look straight ahead, And your eyelids look right before you. 26 Ponder the path of your feet, And let all your ways be established. 27 Do not turn to the right or the left; Remove your foot from evil. (Prov. 4:25-27)

But when it comes to strengthening and straightening, you need to do about twice as much strengthening as you do straightening. When correction piles up without affirmation, discouragement results.

1Th 5:14 Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.

Too much straightening and not enough strengthening will only lead to more discouragement. Strengthening without straightening will bring temporary relief, but unless the believer corrects his missteps, he'll be right back in discouragement soon. Both are needed. Support the runner, and help him stay in his lane.

II. Encourage By Pursuing Peace and Purity

14 Pursue peace with all *people*, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:

There is possibly nothing more discouraging than ongoing conflict, the opposite of peace. Ongoing fights, arguments, conflicts sap the life out of our joy.

Better *is* a dry morsel with quietness, Than a house full of feasting *with* strife. (Prov. 17:1)

Better to dwell in the wilderness, Than with a contentious and angry woman. (Prov. 21:19)

The life of strife leads to despair.

Scripture warns us against being around those who are perpetual conflict-creators.

Make no friendship with an angry man, And with a furious man do not go, Lest you learn his ways And set a snare for your soul. **Pro 22:24**

Cast out the scoffer, and contention will leave; Yes, strife and reproach will cease. (Prov. 22:10)

On the other hand, Scripture exalts those who live in peace with others.

Psa 133:1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity!

Mat 5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.

One of the ways we encourage each other is by living peaceably with one another in the body of Christ. Instead of looking for disagreements, and looking for ways to admonish and poke and prod, we look for agreement, look for what we can affirm and encourage.

Rom 12:18 If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.

Rom 14:19 Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.

This doesn't mean we become men-pleasers, social chameleons who just echo agreement with everything other people say. No, instead we understand that disagreement and correction and confrontation depend on the importance of the issue between believers, combined with how sure I am correct on the issue. Not every problem is a hill to die on. Not every disagreement has to be vocalised and hammered out.

The problem with the person who seems to light up conflict and arguing everywhere she goes is quite simple: pride.

By pride comes nothing but strife, But with the well-advised *is* wisdom. (Prov. 13:10)

As charcoal *is* to burning coals, and wood to fire, So *is* a contentious man to kindle strife. (Prov. 26:21)

A proud person appoints himself the policeman of everyone else's souls, and even of their preferences! A proud man regards all his opinions as Gospel truths, to be held with fiery furor. A proud man has amazing one-eyed vision: incredible power to spot and name faults in others with one eye, while unfortunately having a several-tonne log jutting out the other eye. When people like this strut around the church unrestrained, it is very discouraging for God's people. Most of God's people don't come to church for an argument or a fight, and are disheartened when it happens.

But when humility, deference, courtesy, meekness, and kindness rule the day, the psalmist of Psalm 133 says it is like the deeply entrancing fragrance of anointing oil that was used on the High Priests. It is like refreshing moisture coming in to cool and water a parched land. And there is nothing as encouraging as dwelling in a church filled with peace.

Our pursuit is not only of peace, but of purity, not just harmony, but holiness. Without holiness, he says, no one will see the Lord. He is quite right, for Habakkuk 1:13 says of God, “*You are* of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness. (Hab. 1:13)

Unless you have the holiness of Christ credited to you, you will never make it into God's presence. Nothing except perfection can dwell with God.

But here, the writer is not referring to positional holiness, but practical holiness. He is dealing with our characters, our lives in the present. Does he mean that if we do not perfect holiness in our deeds, we won't see the Lord?

No, he means that the pursuit of holiness is another necessary evidence of our salvation. We have positional holiness, but we are to flesh that out, and make that known practically. If there is no practical holiness in our lives, there is good reason to doubt that there is any positional holiness.

Mat 5:8 Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.

And indeed, the believer who is not pursuing holiness is not seeing the Lord through illuminated eyes in this life. He is not experiencing the truth of the Word come alive to him. That's why he is discouraged. There is nothing as discouraging as feeling that the Lord is far, and that your

conscience is guilty. When the things of God seem dull and lifeless, that is a leanness in your soul, and it is discouraging.

Now just as we should pursue peace with each other, so we should pursue holiness for each other. Earlier in the book, we read that 24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, (Heb. 10:24)

How do I stir others up to holy living? Well, ask yourself, how have others encouraged you to a holier life?

First, by example. I need to do it myself, and show the beauty and winsomeness of godliness. Live a beautiful life, which is the same thing as saying, live a holy life, and it will encourage others.

Second, by exhortation. Encourage each other to put off sin, and to put on righteousness, to give up the world and its ways, and to pursue holy, separated living.

We encourage by strengthening and straightening. We encourage by pursuing peace and purity.

III. Encourage By Watching and Warning

15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; 16 lest there *be* any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. 17 For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears. (Heb. 12:12-17)

If you want to make sure your fellow believers endure, you must look carefully for something. This word for look carefully is the verb form of one of the titles of a pastor – the overseer, bishop. You must oversee others. We must look out lest anyone- just one of our number end up in one of the states described here in verses 15 to 16. You see the word “lest” three times in these verses, so these are the things we must look out for, lest discouragement become deathly.

The first is that someone falls short of the grace of God. What does that mean? Often travelling with us are those “Christians” who need to be saved. They think they are, they feel they are, until finally confronted with the reality that they aren't. They are the ones who are in danger of turning back. They could come close, but fall short of actually, fully embracing God's grace in Jesus. As Jesus told us in the parable of the soils, at least half of the people who hear the Word and seem to accept it have only a superficial zeal. But that zeal wears off when there are troubles and trials, and their false faith gets scorched by the drought of persecution, or choked by worldliness or wealth.

But the hope is that they can also get saved. We can be there at that moment and call on them to be truly saved. They can go from religious to redeemed, from Christians in name to Christians by nature, from self-confident in their works to Christ-confident in His work. One of the ways we do that is by insisting on hearing a person's salvation testimony.

Don't assume everyone in this room is saved. Ask. Find out where someone is, if he or she has truly trusted Christ. Exhort those unsure to make sure.

The second careful oversight we must do is to make sure no one is developing a root of bitterness that will defile others.

Bitterness is actually settled anger. It is when someone is resentful, unhappy, and hostile, but has learned to choke it back, and stomach it. They haven't repented of their anger, they have swallowed it. Bitter people can greet you with a smile. And there it sits, like acid reflux coming up and leaving

a horrible aftertaste for everything they see and experience. Bitterness is a metaphor for a small thing that changes the taste of everything. In Scripture, it often referred to a bitter herb, wormwood, that when placed in water, poisoned the whole lot, and made it all undrinkable.

A bitter person can no longer see the good as good, the blessings as blessings. The whole vision is jaundiced, the whole interpretation is skewed. **Acts 8:23** "For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." (Acts 8:23)

Bitter people usually started out discouraged. But then they didn't respond to their discouragement biblically, and that discouragement turned into discontent. And if they still didn't respond to their discontent biblically, the discontent starts looking for people to blame, and it becomes resentment. And if you don't deal with resentment biblically, it turns into hostility and suppressed hatred, which is bitterness.

The problem is, bitterness spreads, the way wormwood would embitter all the water it was placed in. In Deuteronomy 29:18, the Lord warns against the spreading bitterness of apostasy. You are who you attract and you are attracted to what you are or what you would wish to be. Bitter people seek out other bitter people. When they don't find people as bitter, they find people not quite as far down the road as them: discouraged people, or even discontent. And then they spread their bitterness, wanting people to become as resentful as they are.

1Co 15:33 Do not be deceived: "Evil company corrupts good habits."

Scripture says, if you want to be encouraged, and encourage others, look out for any bitterness. Confront it in love. Admonish, warn, call on the person to repent and deal with his or her anger in a biblical fashion.

Watch out for those almost Christians who could fall short.

Watch out for discouraged believers who have become bitter.

Here's the third thing to watch out for: immoral and irreverent people.

Look out lest there be a fornicator or a profane person. A fornicator is anyone guilty of *porneia*, immorality. That can be any number of sexual sins, but the person who is unrepentantly, unceasingly continuing in sexual sin is now characterised by this. And since we are to be pursuing holiness, we are to watch out for a kind of permissiveness in this area. All sin is sin, but sin in this area brings a deeper kind of guilt, and a deeper kind of shame. If the person is a true Christian, he or she will live in deep discouragement. They need to be pulled out of the ditch they are in. And if they are left there, it becomes very discouraging for the rest of the church to know that sin is going on in our midst and nothing is being done about it. It makes everything seem phoney.

The other kind of person to watch out for is the profane person.

The word means one who is not consecrated to holy things. His soul regards the flesh and the Spirit as the same, the world and the church, nothing is sacred, nothing is holy, all things that seem useful or pleasurable. *Profanum*= to bring the dust and dirt of ordinary life into the sacred space meant you had no respect for holy things.

His illustration of a profane man is Esau.

Esau would have made a fine neighbour – good hunter, loved his father. But he was profane - not interested in the things of God, no spiritual diligence, living for the world and the flesh.

For one single meal, for one morsel, soon to be consumed by his body, he gave up the inheritance of the firstborn. He sacrificed the permanent on the altar of the immediate, he gave up the future for the present, gave up what was valuable though not visible for what could be smelt and tasted, led by

appetite and not by faith, by passing whims and not eternal promises. Afterwards, he desired the blessing, but he couldn't turn back the clock. He shed tears, but he could not undo the choices he made, and the blessing already given to Jacob. Esau is an example of a forfeited promise because of a worldly approach to life.

The profane man has no real faith, no real love of the things of God, no thirst for prayer, little tolerance for worship.

Spurgeon said, what you win them with is what you have to keep them with. Some churches use worldliness to attract, and then find that they have plenty of worldlings in their pews. A church full of spiritual adulterers is not the path to power, usefulness, or encouragement.

I find that when I spend extended time with unbelieving family, I am spiritually drained and depleted by the end of it. They love totally different things to me. So what is it like when the church starts to tolerate worldly and unspiritual "Christians". It becomes very discouraging.

So if we are watching out for the almost Christian, the bitter Christian, the immoral, the profane, and we think we have found one, what do we do?

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who *are* spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:1-2)

With a humble and meek attitude, you do your best to rescue someone from their complacency or bitterness or sin or irreverence.

Cain asked God sarcastically, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer to that is, "Yes!" Yes, you are. You are responsible to consider one another to provoke to love and good works. You encourage with strengthening words of comfort and straightening words of truth. You encourage by pursuing peace in the church and purity. You encourage by watching out for the complacent, the bitter, immoral or irreverent. They are discouraged and will spread discouragement. You warn and restore.

Augustine: "God of our life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and weigh us down; when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies grey and threatening; when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage. Flood the path with light, run our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to brave music; give us the sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life, to Your honour and glory."